



Part I:

Strategic Thinking for the Paralegal:

What's Your Career Plan?

Career planning can be an overwhelming task. It requires self-analysis along with an external awareness of the economy, industry, profession and other criteria that may impact one's mission or goal(s). Part of the plan may include a critical analysis of the basic who, what, where, when and how. Who are we at this very moment? What would we like to achieve or be known for? Where would we like to be in five years or more? When will we put our strategy into action? How will we transition from plan to reality? The list goes on and on. No matter how daunting it may be, all professionals and future professionals need a solid career plan.

Fortunately, career planning is a doable process. With the right strategic tools and guidelines, anyone can create a successful plan. Over the next several months we will break apart this process to create a solid career plan. For now, our first steps are to: (1) truthfully analyze who we are; (2) outline the goals we would like to achieve; and (3) list potential obstacles to our goals.

For our purposes, we will use the tried and true method of the SWOT Analysis. For those of you unfa-

miliar with a SWOT Analysis, it is simply an acronym for **S**trengths, **W**eaknesses, **O**pportunities and **T**hreats. One's strengths and weaknesses are internal while opportunities and threats are external. It is normally used by corporations, businesses and professionals (across multiple industries) to analyze competitors, an industry, market segments, etc. Here, we will use the SWOT Analysis as a career planning tool for paralegal students, new entrants in the industry and seasoned professionals.

If you are visual like me, this diagram may help you. We'll break it down more as we go along:

Internal	I. STRENGTHS	II. WEAKNESS
External	III. OPPORTUNITIES	IV. THREATS

Step One – Internal Analysis

Our first step is to look internally – you guessed it – at our strengths and weaknesses. Our strengths are defined as the positive things we possess that either promote or exhibit what we already have within us. Alternately, as we reflect on our weaknesses, we want to look at these areas of lack that need some fine tuning.

At either end of the spectrum, these items may include: academic training, work experience as a paralegal, tech savvy, work experience or abilities outside the field (these are called transferable skills), professional and personal contacts, association memberships, leadership ability, communication skills, personal characteristics, etc. Items such as being a team player, having a good or poor work ethic, decision making abilities and more can also fit in these categories. Anything that defines you as a person, student and/or employee should be listed here.

The purpose of an internal analysis is to pinpoint the areas you can brag about when marketing yourself to a potential employer. Think about using key terms from your elevator speech or tagline. For instance, my tagline is: I am an out-of-the-box overachiever in the pursuit of excellence. A mouthful in less than five seconds for sure! Create your own and put it in your strengths column.

You also want to identify the areas that need improvement so you can begin working on them. For instance, if you are currently attending a paralegal studies program and have a low GPA, you have an opportunity to improve your work ethic, study/work harder and raise it much higher. If your resume or interviewing skills need work, reach out to someone who can help you in those areas. Almost anything can be improved.

The questions to be answered here:

- Who am I?
- Who do people say I am?
- What’s great about me?
- What have I accomplished?
- What’s my tagline?
- What areas need improvement?

Using some of the above items, the first part of the chart could now look something like:

Internal	I. STRENGTHS	II. WEAKNESSES
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graduate of ABA approved program • 2 years paralegal experience • 5 years experience in mortgage industry (transferable skill) • Tech savvy (transferable skill) • Member of PAP, NFPA, PAN • Strong contacts within DA’s office • Active on PAP’s Pro Bono Committee • Good listener • Team player 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of work experience • Fear of speaking in public • Shy • 2.0 GPA • Outdated resume • Poor interviewing skills • Indecisiveness • Poor spelling/grammar

The key here is to be honest. Never overstate your strengths or diminish your weaknesses. Think about how an employer may view your strengths and weaknesses. What would they absolutely love about you and what would they improve if given the chance? If you’re a student, ask your professors what they think about you. If you’ve already graduated, you can still ask your professors what they thought about you. Just keep in mind that true growth requires both an introspective and external analysis.

Step Two: External Analysis

Our next step is to think about what’s going on around us. This includes the industry as a whole and the profession itself. So, we want to look carefully at each to pinpoint the vast amount of opportunities available to you. This is where you create a list of goals and opportunities available to you. For instance, you may want to include positive trends in the paralegal field (i.e., nurse paralegals, bankruptcy paralegals, etc.). You may also want to include something about

the opportunities available to you if you continue your education. What are your opportunities for advancement? These all fall into the Opportunities column.

As the SWOT analysis is all about balance, we also want to identify potential threats to your goals and the professional opportunities available to you. The key here is to look at conditions outside of yourself that you have no control over. Some of these items may include the economy, layoffs, budget cuts, competition, etc.

After the external analysis, our chart may now look like this:

Internal	I. STRENGTHS	II. WEAKNESSES
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graduate of ABA approved program • 2 years paralegal experience • 5 years experience in mortgage industry (transferable skill) • Tech savvy (transferable skill) • Member of PAP, NFPA, PAN • Strong contacts within DA's office • Active on PAP's Pro Bono Committee • Good listener • Team player 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of work experience • Fear of speaking in public • Shy • 2.0 GPA • Outdated resume • Poor interviewing skills • Indecisiveness • Poor spelling/grammar
External	III. OPPORTUNITIES	IV. THREATS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Master's Degree in paralegal studies • Continuing education courses in public speaking and technology • Paralegal job with management opportunity • Rapid growth • Freelance opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor economy • Layoffs/Downsizing • Recent college graduates w/higher GPA • More experienced paralegals • Freelance paralegals • 1st year Associates

The external analysis may require you to do a little research to see where the profession is heading and what trends are developing. You may want to reach out to individuals who have their finger on the pulse of the industry overall and the paralegal field. Some of these people could be as close as a professor or another colleague. Legal recruiters are a good source for this kind of information. Robert Half Legal (www.roberthalflegal.com) offers free resources annually with valuable information on the latest trends, salary compensation and opportunities within the legal industry.

Remember, your goal here is to take the first step in creating a concrete game plan for your future. Think about what you want to accomplish. Critically analyze what you already possess and the areas that need to be improved. This exercise can be done for a myriad of reasons but it works wonders for the paralegal student or working paralegal seeking to achieve great things in the legal industry.

Next up: "Part II: Strategic Thinking for the Paralegal: What's Your Marketing Strategy?" We'll use the information from your SWOT Analysis to create your very own marketing strategy. Stay tuned....

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